

Academic Focus or Product Promotion?: Campus Tours at Guaranteed Admissions

Institutions

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## Abstract

This descriptive qualitative case study looked at the undergraduate admissions tours at public Universities in the Midwest and Southern United States that employ a “guaranteed admissions” policy. A “guaranteed admissions” policy is one in which if a student applies with a certain GPA, standardized test scores or a combination of both, they are guaranteed a spot at that respective institution. Proponents of “guaranteed admissions” believe they offer a more streamlined and non-discriminatory approach to admissions. Opponents of “guaranteed admissions” policies believe they are not holistic enough and critique the emphasis on standardized test scores. Admissions policies impact millions of students every year and evidence shows that there are deeply rooted socio-economic biases within standardized testing. Understanding guaranteed admissions recruitment practices, including the role of the campus tour, is an important, yet understudied, aspect of the college admissions debate. This study examines how institutions who employ a “guaranteed admissions” policy view campus tours, what those institutions focus on during prospective campus visits, and how tour guides at these institutions view the purpose of campus tours. Data collection involved going on the publicly available campus tours at five institutions who employ a “guaranteed admissions” policy and interviewing the tour guides afterwards. Findings were divided into three categories: schedule and structure of campus tours, scope of tours, and purpose of campus tours. Discussion and implications include how admissions offices can better utilize technology and changes admissions offices can make to help prospective students make the best decision possible in the college choice process.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction.....	1
Literature Review.....	3
Research on strengths/weaknesses of guaranteed admissions.....	4
Potential to increase access to higher education.....	4
Incentives of guaranteed admissions policies.....	5
The use of standardized testing in guaranteed admissions.....	5
Predictive validity?.....	6
Racial disparities in standardized testing.....	8
Purposes of campus tours.....	9
Methods.....	11
Participants.....	13
Triangulated data.....	13
Institutional profiles.....	14
Data analysis.....	15
Researcher positionality.....	16
Limitations.....	16
Findings.....	17
Schedule and structure of tours.....	17
Scope of tours.....	20
Purpose of campus tours.....	23

Discussion.....	26
Implications.....	30
Implications for practice.....	31
Implications for research.....	32
Conclusion.....	33
Bibliography.....	34
Appendix.....	34

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: Required Activities.....	18
Figure 2: Optional Elements.....	19
Figure 3: Campus Tour Activities.....	20
Figure 4: In Scope Of Tours.....	21
Figure 5: Out of Scope of Tours.....	22
Figure 6: Questions that Tour Guides Refer Back to Admissions.....	22

## Academic Focus or Product Promotion?: Campus Tours at Guaranteed Admissions

### Institutions

Every year, millions of high school students apply to post-secondary institutions, and of those, thousands are applying to institutions that employ a guaranteed admissions policy. A “guaranteed admissions” policy is one in which the only metric used to judge a student applying to a University is their grades, class rank, standardized test scores, or a combination of grades and test scores. There are nine states that guarantee admissions to a public university (Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana and Texas) (McCullum, 2019). There are also a number of campuses that use a guaranteed admission policy. One example of these policies is at Oklahoma State University where students qualify for assured admission if they meet one of the following criteria:

- 3.0 GPA or better unweighted cumulative **AND** top 33.3% rank in high school graduating class, **OR**
- 3.0 GPA or better in 15-unit core **AND** 21 ACT/1060 SAT or better, **OR**
- 24 ACT/1160 SAT or better

(Oklahoma State University Freshman admissions requirements, n.d.)

### Importance of campus tours

Campus tours have significance to both students and educators. Secore (2018) explains how campus tours play a crucial role in how a student selects the college they attend: The inference is that every detail in accordance to a campus visit matters. Every aspect of the campus tour plays an essential role in how students make their final decision, and in what

institution they eventually choose. As formerly suggested, personal interactions before, during, and after the campus visit have a profound impact on prospective students. (p. 155) There is evidence that tours increase the chance that a student matriculates. For example, Midwestern State University (MSU) conducted a longitudinal study over a three-year span with a sample size of 23,187 students. The results concluded that “students who visit campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not” (Brown, 2010, p. 152).

Thousands of students are visiting campuses with guaranteed admission policies and submitting applications as they make a critical life decision, yet there is a gap in the college choice research regarding what guaranteed admissions institutions are focusing on during tours. For example, are the information sessions and tours focused on the academic programs at the university? Perhaps the focus is on encouraging students to apply? Or, unlike schools that require an essay and provide a holistic review, is the focus less on getting students to apply and more on encouraging students to accept? Is the tour a ritual, as Magolda (2001) found, that introduces prospective students to the culture of the institution? Or, is there another purpose? This thesis serves to fill this gap and provide information to help admissions offices and tour guides better develop policies and practices for their respective tours. The research questions guiding the study are:

- How much of a focus are academics on tours at guaranteed admissions institutions?
- What do tours at guaranteed admissions institutions focus on and exclude?
- What are the purpose of tours at guaranteed admissions institutions?



In this paper, the author details a descriptive qualitative study focusing on tours and tour guides at public universities that utilize a “guaranteed admissions” policy across the Midwest and Southern United States. Through a literature review, the author discusses the history of guaranteed admissions policies and how socio-economic factors led to their inception. The current usage of “guaranteed admissions” policies is then compared to the wider state of admissions.

Next, the author describes the case-study methodology including the observation protocol, participating institution profiles, interview design, and the coding procedures used. Next, findings from the case study are presented, including what admissions offices focused on in the structuring of campus tours, and what tour guides believed to be important in campus tours. In the final section, the findings are interpreted and discussed. Implications for practice, including how colleges offering a “guaranteed admissions” policy can improve their tours along with further research suggestions are also offered.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will present the multiple factors that need to be considered when studying guaranteed admissions policies, and the purpose of the campus tour. First, the literature detailing some of the strengths and weaknesses of guaranteed admission policies will be explored. This includes the potential of guaranteed admission policies to open up access to higher education to student groups who traditionally have lacked access, the incentive (or disincentive) guaranteed admissions provide high school students, and finally the debate over the use of standardized tests. Next, the author discusses literature regarding the purposes of campus tours and how campus tours are

changing; following this, the author finishes the literature review by discussing the literature regarding the importance of campus tours.

### **Research on the Strengths/Weaknesses of Guaranteed Admissions**

According to the existing research, there are a number of potential strengths of using a guaranteed admission policy, when compared to their more holistic review counterparts. The scholarship also details some of the potential weaknesses of guaranteed admissions. In this section, the author first discusses the potential to increase access, as well as incentivize students to do well in high school, as well as some of the debate surrounding the use of standardized tests as part of a guaranteed admission policy.

#### **Potential to Increase Access to Higher Education**

One strength of a guaranteed admissions policy is a potential increase in access to higher education for some groups. In the state of Idaho, a guaranteed admission program “reduced the gap seen in immediate college enrollment between gender and socioeconomic status” (McCullum, 2019, p. 40). Furthermore, in Idaho that same program was also found to be effective in helping economically disadvantaged students pursue higher education, with low income students being “more likely to choose selective colleges and universities when they knew their admission was guaranteed” (McCullum, 2019, p. 40). There is also evidence that these policies increase access. Black et al. (2015) found that guaranteed admissions policies in the State of Texas caused an increase in applications from high-achieving black students. Furthermore, Cortes and Lincove (2019) found that “automatic admissions have the more hidden benefit of overcoming an information asymmetry that discourages highly qualified, low-income students from

applying to selective institutions where they could succeed” (Cortes & Lincove, 2019, p. 121)

### **Incentives of guaranteed admissions policies**

Discussions around guaranteed admissions policies often involve whether or not the policies create an incentive for high school students, or whether the policies create a disincentive for high school students to do well in the senior year. One side believes that these policies cause students to have a goal to work towards. The other side believes that due to this policy, when a student has reached the level needed to gain admission to their college of choice, they will have no reason to strive to achieve anything else. In reality, according to a recent study, it is a mixture of both, with students putting in extra effort their first few years. According to a study by Leeds, McFarlin and Daugherty (2017) “students face strong incentives during the first 3 years of high school to excel and attend a selective college” (p. 233). However, after the first few years there is evidence of disincentive because “these strong performance incentives all but disappear for eligible students” (Leeds et al. 2017, p. 233). An example of this is that students who have secured admission to college after their junior year take courses deemed less challenging. The study found “little evidence that students take fewer courses, suggesting they substitute away from future advanced coursework. Similarly, we find that students who qualify for guaranteed admissions are less likely to graduate with distinction” (Leeds et al. 2017, p. 233).

### **The Use of Standardized Tests in Guaranteed Admissions**

For many years, colleges have debated the best policy for admissions, including how much emphasis to put on standardized test scores. Different institutions place

different values on standardized tests; this then informs their respective admissions policies. These policies range from the guaranteed admissions policies identified in this paper, to prestigious institutions like the University of Chicago having no standardized test requirements in the admission process to create “a test-optional admissions process to enhance the accessibility of its undergraduate College” (Kmetz, 2018, p. 1). Millions of students take standardized tests every year with the results being a key factor when applying to and enrolling at institutions of higher education. It is therefore important to understand and question the use and validity of these tests. This section of the literature review discusses the validity of standardized tests as a predictor of college success and racial/ethnic biases in standardized tests.

### **Predictive Validity?**

In addition to the discussion about how to best create a policy regarding standardized tests, there is a larger discussion about the validity and accuracy of standardized tests. The College board, the company that administers the SAT, stated that there is:

a clear positive relationship between SAT Analysis in Science cross-test scores and grades in matching college courses. For example, those students with an SAT Analysis in Science cross-test score of 20–24 have an average matching college course grade of 2.70, whereas those students with an SAT Analysis in Science cross-test score of 35–40 have an average matching college course grade of 3.43. (Shaw, Mariani, Beard, Shmueli, Young, & Ng, 2016, p. 18)

The College Board also claims that there is:

a clear positive relationship between SAT Analysis in History/Social Studies cross-test scores and grades in matching college courses. For example, those students with an SAT Analysis in History/Social Studies cross-test score of 20–24 have an average matching college course grade of 2.98, whereas those students with an SAT Analysis in History/Social Studies cross-test score of 35–40 have an average matching college course grade of 3.62. (Shaw et al., 2016, p. 18)

In contrast to College Board published studies, other scholars assert that standardized tests are not an accurate predictor of college performance. For example, Koretz and colleagues (2016) argued that “college admissions tests and state tests may vary in their vulnerability to score inflation, that is, upward bias from inappropriate test preparation, which could undermine their value in predicting performance in college” (Koretz, Mbekeani, Langi, Dhaliwal, & Braslow, 2016, p. 2). In a separate study, Hiss and Franks (2014) compared the college GPAs of students who submitted test scores with the GPAs of students who did not submit scores at test optional institutions. Hiss and Franks found that “the differences between submitters and non-submitters are five one-hundredths of a GPA point, and six-tenths of one percent graduation rates. By any standard, these are trivial differences” (p. 3).

One important question to be asked regarding guaranteed admissions policies is if the policies perpetuate the focus on standardized tests. It is important to ask whether or not these policies built around standardized tests are causing too much emphasis to be placed on a metric that many believe to be an inaccurate predictor of college success. In

addition to validity questions, standardized tests have also been critiqued by researchers because of racial inequities built into the questions and results.

### **Racial disparities in standardized testing**

In addition to questions regarding the validity of standardized testing, there are issues regarding race. In order for the standardized tests such as the SAT or ACT to fulfill their jobs, which for the SAT is “to measure a high school student's readiness for college, and provide colleges with one common data point that can be used to compare all applicants” (The Princeton Review: What is the SAT, n.d.) they need to be fair for all participants. If some groups receive undeserved benefits that other groups do not receive, then the tests are not able to fulfill the purpose of comparing students in a transparent and equitable way. A standardized test is considered culturally biased if one group consistently scores lower than another group (Freedle, 2002). We see this gap within the SAT “Black scores were 17 percent lower than white scores” (News and Views, 2001, p. 22). One of the reasons for this difference in scores is how the questions on the tests are selected. During each SAT test, there is a section in which questions are tested to see if they are appropriate for future use. Kidder and Rosner (2002) found that “questions that are “biased” in favor of Whites have a fair chance of making their way onto a scored section of the SAT; ones that are “biased” against Whites have virtually no chance of appearing on a real SAT section” (Kidder & Rosner, 2002, p. 158). The extent of how influential race is within standardized tests is notable; Geiser found in a study that among the 1.1 million students who applied for freshman admission at the University of California between 1994 and 2011, socioeconomic background factors known at students’ birth – family income, parents’ education, and

race/ethnicity – account for an increasing share, over a third, of the variance in SAT scores. Race now uniquely accounts for the largest share. (Geiser, 2015, p. 20)

Again, studies that show racial disparities in standardized tests beg the question: should these tests be used to guarantee admission? Although guaranteed admission programs are touted for encouraging students of color to apply to selective institutions (McCullum, 2019), it is troubling that they rely on tests as part of that guarantee that are racially biased.

This literature helped guide the author when designing the study. Having read about the benefits and drawbacks of guaranteed admissions policies and standardized tests, the author sought to understand how tours and tour guides intersect within the admissions field. Given these dynamics, the author wanted to understand how institutions that employ a guaranteed admissions policy present themselves

Now that we have explored some of the scholarly debate surrounding the use of guaranteed admission policies, it is important to more fully understand the purpose of campus tours.

### **Theoretical Framework: Purpose of campus tours**

Several years ago, the author was a tour guide for prospective students at the University of Minnesota. The University of Minnesota states on their admissions website that:

A campus visit can be one of the best ways for a student to learn more about what a college or university has to offer. Students can learn so much more from a

campus visit than simply from reading a brochure or website. A campus visit will give students a first-hand look at campus classrooms and facilities, the opportunity to speak with current students, and a chance to discuss their own goals and dreams with admissions counselors” (University of Minnesota Office of Admissions: Five tips for a successful campus visit, n.d.)

Although many universities make similar claims about the importance of a campus visit, what does the literature show is the purpose of a campus visit and tour?

Scholars provide a different perspective on the purpose of campus tours. Peter Magolda (2001) conducted an ethnographic study of the campus tour at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. In his work, Magolda asserted that the campus tour is a crucial ritual to initiate a student into a campus community. “The tour is one of many formal rituals that transmit the institution’s political, social, environmental, and cultural expectations and norms for prospective members” (Magolda, 2001, p. 2). Magolda also stated tours are used to establish a dominant culture, that is “the content of a particular campus tour conveys dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs leading to a particular conceptualization of community. The tour illuminates the power of rituals in shaping the experiences of participants” (Magolda, 2001, p. 3). Clinton Conrad noted that the tour is a type of folklore that does not equate to a high quality undergraduate institution. Conrad called the tour guide’s story a myth embedded in folklore and perpetuating the incorrect notion that “high-quality colleges can be easily identified through a handful of signposts, that stand up neither to critical analysis nor to the scholarly literature on quality” (Conrad, 2012, p. 71).



Both Magolda (2001) and Conrad (2012) explore tours at a much deeper socio-cultural level than most college admission offices. The idea that a tour introduces students' to the culture of an institution is a useful conceptual framework with which to understand the purpose and importance of the campus visit.

While some research and other published works have contributed to understanding campus tours, standardized tests and guaranteed admissions policies, there is no available research regarding how much schools that utilize guaranteed admissions focus on academics on tours. Because this topic directly affects the college opportunity and college choice, understanding the focus of these tours is key to understanding this issue. This qualitative study seeks to illuminate how colleges that employ guaranteed admissions policy are conducting campus tours, and illuminating what the tours are focusing on. This study uses field notes from five campus tours and interviews of tour guides. The following section details procedures for data collection and analysis and provides further context for the study and the researcher.

### **Methods**

This study examines admissions tours in colleges that have guaranteed admissions policies. Outlined in the following section are the research questions addressed by this study, critical terms, procedures for data collection and analysis, researcher background, and potential limitations of this study. To examine college tours, the researcher conducted a qualitative case study, defined by Creswell as a “type of design in qualitative research in which the investigator explores a real life, contemporary bounded system (case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual

material, and documents, and reports), and reports a case description and case themes.” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). Because of the nature of the topic, especially the open-ended perspectives of tour guides, a case study methodology was the best fit for providing an in-depth analysis. This exploratory analysis can be further examined and built upon by future researchers.

Across the country, tours are conducted in many ways with different focuses. Some institutions offer tours that focus on academic opportunities, some institutions offer opportunities for prospective students to attend class sessions, some institutions allow students to meet with an admissions counselor, some allow students to tour athletic facilities, among others. Because of the lack of research regarding these tours, the researcher saw an opportunity that an in-depth study can provide on admissions practices and campus tours. Therefore, the questions addressed by this study are:

- How much of a focus are academics on tours at guaranteed admissions institutions?
- What do tours at guaranteed admissions institutions focus on and exclude?
- What are the purpose of tours at guaranteed admissions institutions?

For the purpose of this study, a “guaranteed admissions” policy is one in which a student applies with a certain GPA, standardized test scores or a combination of both, they are guaranteed a spot at that respective institution. The Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study, determining that it did not involve human subject research.

## **Participants**

This study took place at 5 medium to large public research Universities in the Midwest and Southern United States; enrollment at all these institutions was above 15,000 students and below 40,000 students. The institutions were chosen based on fit in the study, geographic location, and availability of tours on travel dates. Data consisted of field notes from observation on the tours, and interviews with the tour guides at these institutions. All the tours were available to the public and completed in the summer of 2018. Interviews were conducted with tour guides at four of the institutions; due to scheduling, there was one institution where the tour was possible but an interview with the tour guide was not. One institution had two tour guides at the interview to add extra perspective. The tour guides were all undergraduate upper-classman at their respective institutions and had been tour guides for at least one year. All the institutions participating were emailed ahead of time, told that the name of the institution would not be used, and all agreed to allow the author to participate in and observe a tour. It was explained before the interviews with the tour guides that participation was optional and they could stop the interview at any time if they wanted to. Interviewees received no compensation for their participation.

## **Triangulated Data**

The researcher collected data through interviews and campus tour observations. For the interviews, the researcher created 12 questions to help answer the three questions posed in this study. (See Appendix for a copy of the interview questions.) Observation notes from the five admission office presentations, public tours, and the four interviews with tour guides were then organized into field notes and a spreadsheet. The tour guides

were asked the 12 questions about their experiences as tour guides, their perspectives of their respective campuses tours, and their overall perspectives of the purpose of campus tours as a whole. Interviews ranged from ten to fifteen minutes and were recorded and then transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

### **Institution profiles**

The following is a description of all the schools involved in the study, based on some key characteristics of the institutions:

**University 1** is an R3 public University in the Southeastern United States. The institution had between 8,000 and 9,000 applications in 2017, with an acceptance rate between 70% and 80%. The institutions enrollment is between 10,000 and 20,000 students, and is located in a town with a population between 100,000 and 150,000 people. The interviewee at this institution was referred to as “Tour Guide 1”.

**University 2** is an R1 public University in the Southeastern United States. The institution had between 16,000 and 18,000 applications in 2017, with an acceptance rate between 70% and 80%. The institutions enrollment is in-between 10,000 and 20,000 students, and is located in a town with a population between 1 and 50,000 people. The interviewee at this institution was “Tour Guide 2.”

**University 3** is an R2 public University in the Southern United States. The institution had between 16,000 and 18,000 applications in 2017, with an acceptance rate between 70% and 80%. The institutions enrollment is in-between 20,000 and 30,000 students, and is

located in a town with a population between 1 and 50,000 people. The interviewee at this institution was “Tour Guide 3.”

**University 4** is an R1 public University in the Midwest United States. The institution had between 14,000 and 16,000 applications in 2017, with an acceptance rate between 90% and 100%. The institutions enrollment is in-between 20,000 and 30,000 students, and is located in a town with a population between 50,000 and 100,000 people. Due to conflicts in scheduling, the researcher got the opportunity to go on the tour but did not get the opportunity to interview a tour guide.

**University 5** is an R1 public University in the Midwest of the United States. The institution had between 18,000 and 20,000 applications in 2017, with an acceptance rate between 80% and 90%. The institutions enrollment is in-between 30,000 and 40,000 students, and is located in a town with a population between 50,000 and 100,000 people. The researcher got to interview two tour guides at University 5. The first interviewee at this institution was “Tour guide 4.” The second interviewee at this institution was “Tour guide 5.”.

### **Data Analysis**

After compiling all the data, the researcher transcribed each tour guide interview and coded to search for themes. The researcher aimed to find themes that addressed what the purpose of campus tours are and how much of a focus academics are at institutions with guaranteed admissions policies through a constant comparative method, which is a method used by the researcher to explore concepts within the data by analyzing and coding at the same time (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). A constant comparative method was chosen as the most useful approach as it allowed the researcher to make the tour guide

perspectives the center of the study but also analyze how the tour observations provided context. The researcher transcribed all the interviews and transferred the data into a spreadsheet. The researcher then organized and categorized the data and observations into 3 categories- schedule and structure of tours, scope of tours and purpose of tours.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This study serves as the master's thesis for the researcher's master of arts degree in organizational leadership, policy, and development with a focus in higher education. The researcher conducted this study while enrolled in a master's program. The researcher chose this topic because of a personal interest and experience working in international recruitment at a large public Research institution in the Midwest along with experience working in an admissions office in a large public Research institution in the Southern United States. As a student with a bachelor's degree in marketing, the researcher has an interest in how the marketing and admissions fields intersect. Therefore, the researcher comes to this study with a positive view of how institutions of Higher education portray themselves. This is the first independent research study that this researcher has conducted. This study was conducted under the advisory of a faculty member, and the primary interests of the researcher are in understanding the purpose of tours and how they can be improved.

### **Limitations**

Because this is a qualitative research study, it is not generalizable. These findings relate to these particular tours and tour guides, and institution types—that is, medium to large public research Universities in the Midwest and Southern United States. The tours and interviews were also conducted over the summer, when most students are off

campus, limiting potential observations of students on campus. This study also only presents interview data from the tour guides, and not anyone else who works in an admissions office. Because of this, this study does not provide the entire spectrum of opinions and perspectives of campus tours. The researcher toured five institutions for this study; however, there are over fifteen institutions nationally that employ a guaranteed admissions policy. This further makes it difficult to make conclusions on the entire spectrum of institutions that employ a guaranteed admissions policy. The tours attended along with the tour guides interviewed are a convenience sample and do not represent every institution and tour guide. Because of these limitations, the researcher hopes that this case study will encourage further research into campus tours.

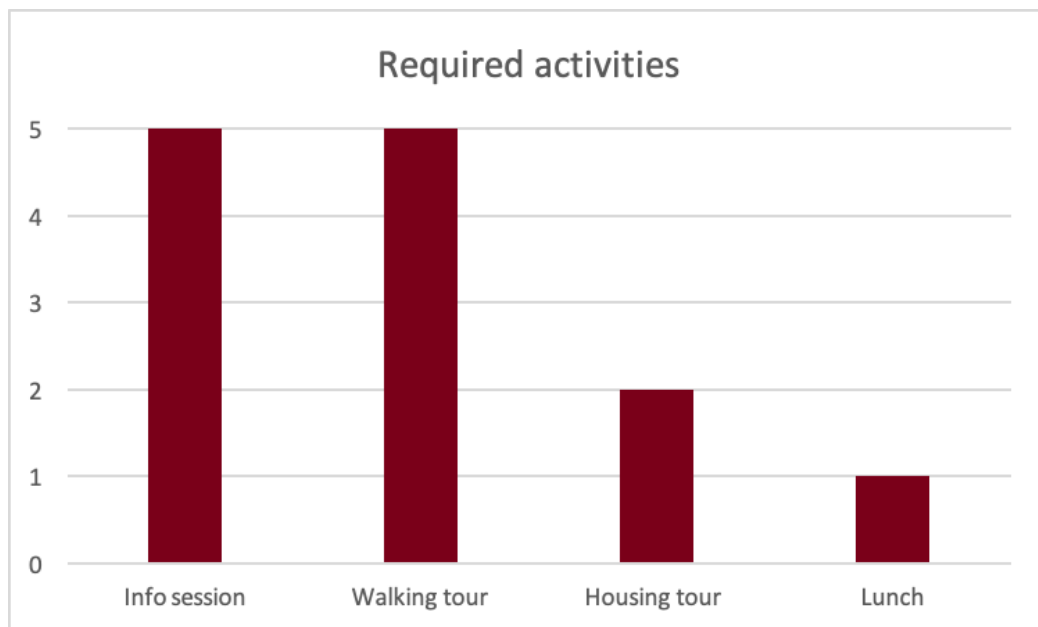
### **Findings**

By observing multiple campus tours and conducting interviews with tour guides, this study examines the structure and purpose of tours at Universities with guaranteed admissions. This study presents several important findings that illuminate elements of campus tours at colleges with guaranteed admission standards. These findings have been divided into three categories: the first category is the schedule and structure of tours, the second area is the tour guide's answers to the question "What is in the scope of a campus tour". The third area to answer this question is the tour guide's answers to the question "How would you define the purpose of a campus tour?"

#### **Schedule and structure of tours**

One important distinction to make in this study is the difference between what an admissions office believes to be important in an effective tour and what a tour guide

believes to be important in an effective tour. By looking at how tours are structured and what activities are included and available we can better understand what admissions offices believe are important in an effective tour. All five of the tours in this study had a different structure with unique activities; no two tours in this study had the same structure. For this findings section, the activities have been split into two categories- required activities and optional activities.

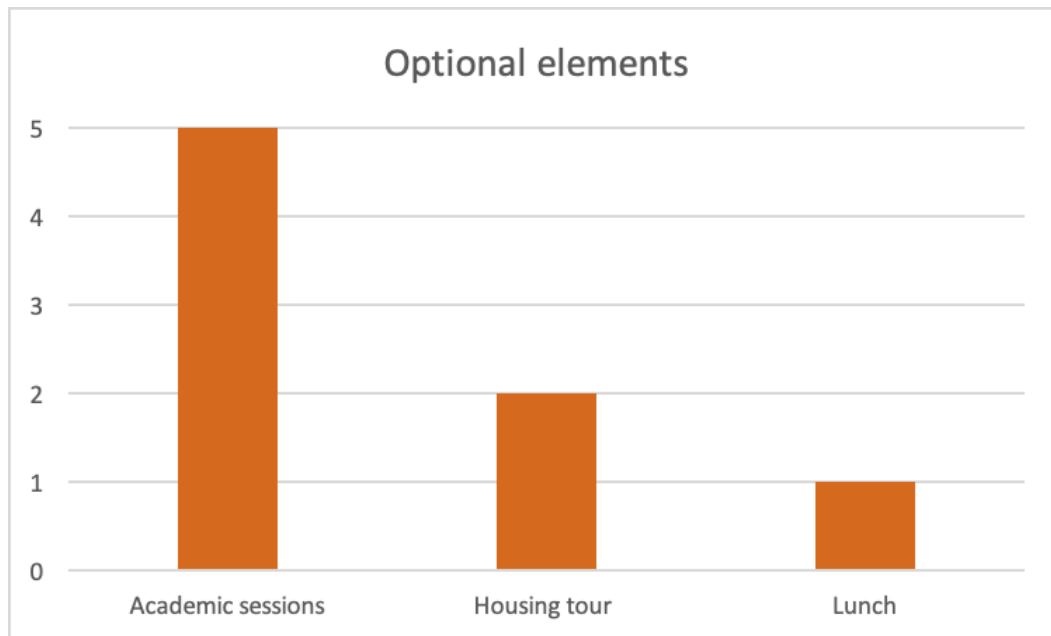


*Figure 1: Required Activities*

As shown in Figure 1, the only activities that were consistently required at all five institutions was an information session and a walking tour. At two of the five a housing

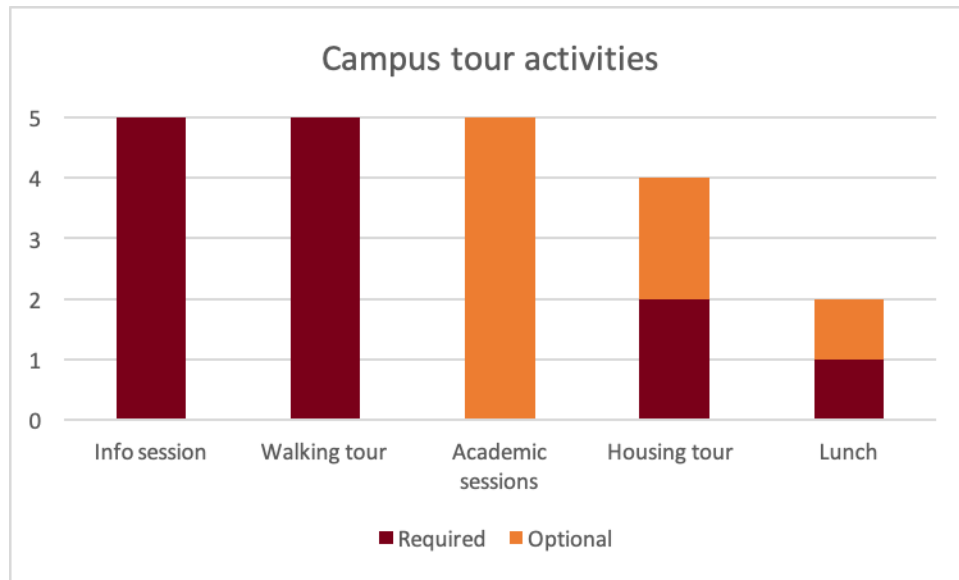


tour was included and at one lunch was provided. Required activities were those that admissions offices considered to be integral on tours.



*Figure 2: Optional Elements*

Figure 2 provides an overview of the activities that the tours offered that were optional for students to participate in. All five institutions offered academic sessions if students wanted them. Two of the five institutions also offered an optional housing tour; this means that four of the five institutions offered a housing tour of some variety when combining required and optional housing tours. One final institution also offered lunch to the students (who had to pay), making two of the five institution offer lunch on campus. Every single tour guide talked about retail dining options on their respective campus.



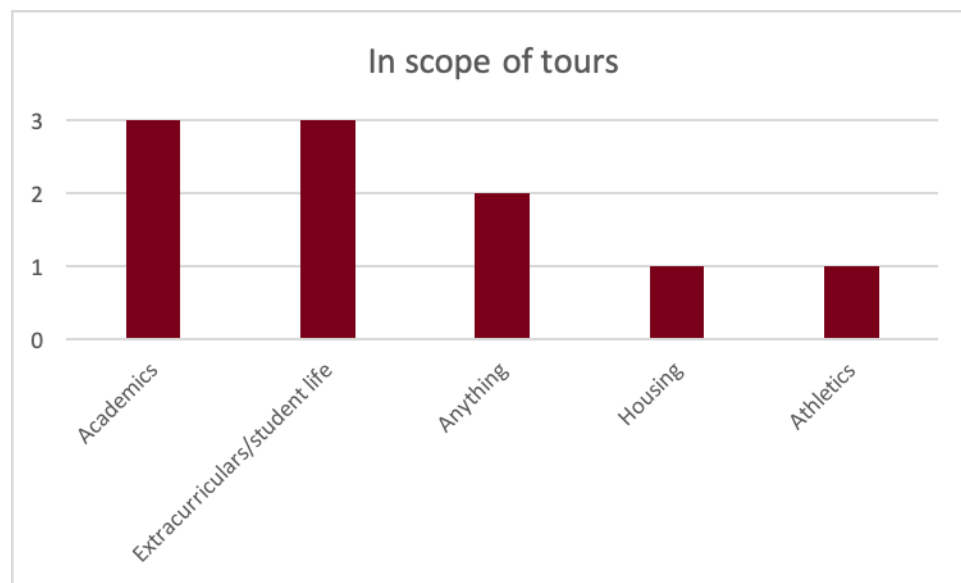
*Figure 3: Campus Tour Activities*

The stacked graph in Figure 3 shows what the overall tour structures look like and what admissions offices are focusing on when deciding how to present their institution to prospective students. All five required information sessions and a walking tour, along with optional academic sessions. All four had a housing tour with fifty percent of tours requiring them. Two of the four schools offered lunch, with one requiring it on the tour. These five components are the major components that admissions offices believe to be important to a campus tour.

### **Scope of tours**

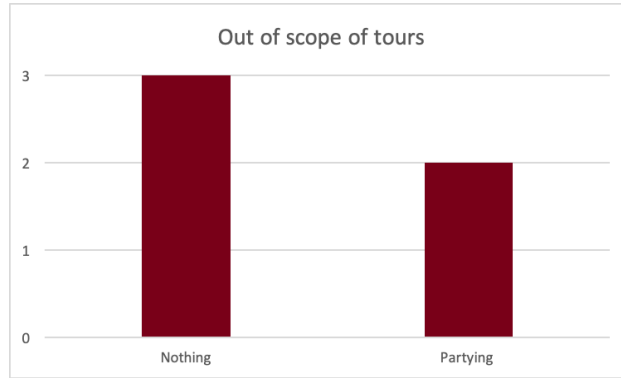
This section will show the results regarding what the tour guides believe to be important to a tour, complementing the previous section regarding what admissions offices believe to be important in tours. This section will largely focus on the answers the tour guides gave to the question “what do you believe is in the scope and what do you believe is out of the scope of a good tour?” Along with what tour guides believed to be in

the scope of a tour, this section will also touch on what the guides believed should be excluded from the tours.



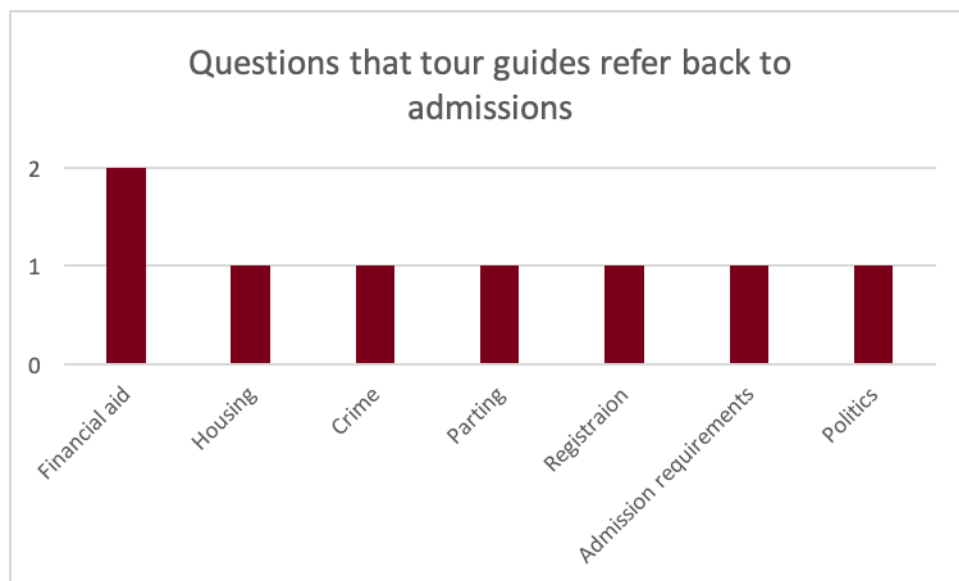
*Figure 4: In Scope Of Tours*

Figure 4 shows what tour guides believed to be important on an effective campus tour, with the most popular two responses being academics and extracurricular/student life, with three of the five tour guides identifying both. Housing and athletics were identified as within the scope of tours (Tour Guide 1 was the same interviewee who identified both housing and athletics). It is important to note here that two guides said anything was within the scope, as long as the tour was personal “it doesn’t matter if you cover specific things, just that you tell your story” (Tour Guide 4, personal communication, August 1, 2018) and “when I’m giving a tour I focus on what I can do to enhance this guests experience. Telling stories and making people feel welcome. I also think helping people find those individual connections like sports if they’re interested in that, and I think that goes back to the individual experience” (Tour Guide 5, personal communication, August 1, 2018).



*Figure 5: Out of Scope of Tours*

The tour guides also answered what they believed should not be included in a tour, shown in Figure 5. Tour Guide One and Two both identified partying as something that should not be included in tours. “In terms of what shouldn’t be talked about is the negative side is [institution] reputation of having the best partying” (Tour Guide 2, personal communication, July 26, 2018). However, the other three tour guides believed that nothing should be avoided in a tour.



*Figure 6: Questions that Tour Guides Refer Back to Admissions*

Another important distinction to make when understanding tours is elements that tour guides believe should be outside of the scope of a tour, and what admissions offices believe should be excluded from a tour. Figure 6 represents the tour guides answers to the question “Are there any questions asked/topics that you are told to refer the people on the tour to the admissions office?” There were a range of responses, with most of them related to specific procedures and policies. Some of these included “Questions I will refer back to are questions about registration or what they have to get in order to be accepted into [institution] or questions about scholarships because those are questions typically very specific things people are interested in that I may not know as a tour guide” (Tour Guide 4, personal communication, August 1, 2018). Another noted that “Financial aid is referred back to the office of admissions or the financial aid office just because financial aid is always changing. Housing is referred back to student housing” (Tour Guide 2, personal communication, July 26, 2018).

### **Purpose of a campus tour**

One of the most critical elements of this study is understanding what the true purpose of a campus tour is. One of the questions asked to the tour guides was “How would you define the purpose of a tour?” the responses were all different to some degree.

Tour Guide 1 had a simple belief that a tour was to show a prospective student what the institution offered, and did not believe tours were linked to culture or joining a community: “I’ve had a lot of different people, who said “I never thought about coming to [Institution 1] but after seeing campus here I’m considering it”. So, I think it’s a way to

show students who never would have given [Institution 1] a chance just all we offer” (personal communication, July 25, 2018).

Tour Guide 2 took a different view, asserting that a tour was an opportunity for a student to envision themselves attending the institution, and the tour was less about academic programs:

I think the true purpose of a campus tour should allow the students to envision themselves walking on campus, walking through the [name of quad at institution 2], walking across campus to their different classes. I think they should be able to see themselves here living in our student body. I think every student here no matter where they go, they should have a weird feeling in their stomach and say, you know what I belong here and I saw myself eating lunch in the union and I can picture myself here for the next four years of my life. (personal communication, July 26, 2018)

Tour Guide Three’s views on tours were a lot broader than the views of Tour Guide One or Two. While Tour Guide Three acknowledged that the institution wants to attract and get students to apply, they believed the tour was there to help students form a complete opinion of the institution in order to make an informed decision:

I would say the purpose and intent for us on our tour is to officially open our doors to being part of the family, so if somebody’s really interested in an academic program we want to open that door for them and say this is the opportunity you could have. If it’s somebody who really wants to stay in state and has really cool opportunities here we want them to know about the opportunities

available here on our campus. In a sense we want people to attend school here, but I'll say that I want students to attend a school they love as much as I love. So while I do hope people will come to school here and that they want to, I know that this place isn't for everybody. For the most part we want to equip people with the information so they can make their decision. (personal communication, July 27, 2018)

Tour Guide Four had a similar view to Tour Guide in that they believed the purpose of a campus tour is to help prospective students envision themselves at the institution they were touring and understand what it's like to be a student at that institution:

I think the purpose of a campus tour for visiting students is for them to get to experience what we do, see campus through our eyes and get them to understand that they're going to have an individual experience that's not like any other student here. It's for students to have their eyes open to what college can be like. (personal communication, August 1, 2018)

Tour Guide Five took a similar approach to Tour Guides Two and Four. They believed that if a student can envision coming to the institution they are touring, then a tour guide has done a successful tour. They talked about the "gut feeling" that many of the other tour guides talked about. It is also important to note here that Tour Guide Four and Five are from the same institution. Tour guide 5:

It sounds kind of cheesy but it's that feeling of stepping on a campus and that feeling and seeing other students going around it helps them visualize themselves stepping into an environment and see themselves having experiences. It really

comes back to that feeling and finding a campus that feels right and where they enjoy. (personal communication, August 1, 2018)

All five tour guides had a slightly different perspective on what the purpose of a tour is, with some focusing on showing opportunities and others talking about a “gut” feeling that a student has that the school they’re visiting is where they should attend.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study help answer the three questions of this study:

How much of a focus are academics on tours at guaranteed admissions institution?

While there were some consistencies among the answers given to the question of “how would you define the purpose of a campus tour,” some believed the purpose of tours was to introduce a student to an institution, others believed the purpose of tours was to encourage students to attend the institution they represented, while others believed that the purpose of tours was to see themselves on campus. However, no tour guide indicated that the purpose of a tour was academics, and throughout the entire tour process (information sessions, walking sessions and other activities) academics were not a heavy focus.

The structure of the tours help answer the question of how much academics are a focus at guaranteed admissions institutions. All the institutions included in this study not only talked about their academic programs and opportunities in the information sessions, but also all five had some form of academic sessions. Examples of these sessions were



meeting with an academic advisor, meeting with professors, or sitting in on a lecture.

These were all optional, so while not a focus of the tour, they were available to interested students.

- What do tours at guaranteed admissions institutions focus on and exclude?

There were some consistencies among the institutions on what they chose to include and what they chose to exclude. Overall, the institutions didn't make academics a focal point of the tours, but still talked about academics substantially; they all had in depth information sessions at the beginning of the tours which were primarily focused on academics. However, while on the walking sections of the tours, much of the focus was on life at that school e.g. housing, athletics or architecture, among others. Each institution had different policies of what to include and exclude from their tours. It is important to note when discussing what institutions include and exclude is understanding questions that tour guides refer back to admissions office. When answering the question of what questions are referred back to the admissions office, these were mostly technical questions such as "when do students register?" or "can I bring x to the dorms.". When asked what general elements should not be included on the tours, tour guides were looking at big elements such as partying/campus culture. While there were some consistencies among what was to be included and excluded, each institution was different, so discussing general themes is hard in this situation.

- What are the purpose of campus tours at guaranteed admissions institutions?

After interviewing the tour guides and hearing the answer to the question of “How would you define the purpose of a tour?” much of the purpose of a tour can be viewed as an opportunity for a student to envision themselves at an institution. Many of the tour guides viewed the tours as a way for a student to understand what life was like on that campus, and hope the prospective students would envision themselves walking across campus. This can also be viewed as a parallel to the sales principle alluded to earlier, where it is essential for a prospective customer (the prospective student in this situation) to try out the product (the campus in this situation) in their own hands.

Same Suggestion.

The findings of this study support some of the current literature around campus tours. Tour guides viewed tours as a critical element to a student’s process of selecting a college to enroll in, and they viewed tours as one way to help students understand social and academic options available. Admissions offices felt that academics were an important factor so therefore included academics as part of the tours, whether it be mandatory or optional. The tour structures also echoed some important elements to making students visualize themselves living on campus and attending the institution, such as housing tours and lunch options. All five colleges that were part of this study offer a virtual tour for students who can’t visit physically. This matches the trends that have been happening recently in admissions offices, as many colleges have started to utilize non-traditional campus tours, especially due to advancements in technology. Emory University, along with the traditional tour guide led tour, has a self-guided walking tour as an alternative “The tour sites themselves were marked by ten attractive metal signs, shaped like

historical markers, whose text was drawn from the brochure. Brochures are available at three campus locations and on line” (Barlett, 2002, p. 2). The tour was “created as part of a larger effort to increase campus environmental awareness and commitment to action” (Barlett, 2002, p. 2). Another common advancement in college tours is online tours for students unable to physically visit campus. Colleges themselves are offering these tours; one example of this is at Harvard University, which allows prospective students to “Take our online guided tour to see the Harvard campus at any time, from any location. Student guides lead you through the places they live and learn, including dorm rooms, classrooms, Widener Library, the first-year dining hall and more” (Harvard University: Harvard Virtual tour, n.d.). Along with colleges creating their own tours, third party companies are also creating videos to assist students in the college choice process. An example of these services is YOUNiversityTV, which “offers students an interactive virtual environment with access to hundreds of colleges across the U.S. The tours include campus highlights, special facilities, an overview of academics and unscripted interviews with faculty members and students” (Gilroy, 2010, p. 1).

In contrast to some of the current literature on campus tours, tour guides did not view tours as a way to initiate a student into a campus culture, to convey a dominant culture, or to illustrate the power of ritual (Magolda, 2001). While the tour guides did not believe that tours were a way to initiate a student into a campus culture, the researcher observed many instances on the tours that would contradict this. One observation was at institution two, in which part of the tour involved the tour guide teaching people one of the University cheers. Another example of tour guides initiating people attending the tour into campus culture was at institution five, where the tour guides spoke about different

campus superstitions multiple times. These examples support Magolda's assertions that the purpose of a campus tour is to initiate an individual into campus culture, and indicate that while some tour guides may not believe the purpose of the tour is to initiate a prospective student into a culture, they still acting to fulfill that purpose.

One perspective is that a campus tour is a form of sales, and the tour guides are selling the institution. The author of this study has an academic background in sales and believes that when selling a product, it is essential for a customer to try out the product themselves. For example, when selling a phone, it is essential for the customer to test out the phone in a store to understand the experience that phone provides. When a prospective student is touring an institution, parallels can be drawn to this, as the student is testing the campus out themselves. For example, the students are experiencing the culture of the campus, touring the recreational facilities or looking at dormitories, among others. While on the tours, the researcher felt this to be true to some extent, with some of the tour feeling like the tour guides were somewhat selling their respective institution.

### **Implications**

The findings show that while academics are a key element to campus tours at institutions with guaranteed admissions, they are not the focal point. It is important to illuminate the effect that this has on students taking these tours. No tour guides indicated that academics were the purpose of tours. Tour guides also expressed that they believed that finding individual connections to campus life was important on tours. These don't have to be mutually exclusive, as connecting students to academics on campus can be useful in helping a student choose a higher education institution. If campus tours at guaranteed admissions institutions made academics more of a focal point, this may allow students on

the tour to understand academics better. However, such a model or change in structure would require additional research by the academy in terms of effectiveness, as there is no research done into how effective this change of structure would be.

### **Implications for practice**

While all tour guides agreed that campus tours were important and fostered increased interest in their respective schools, there was no discussion in the interviews about students who cannot attend campus tours. In their answers to the interview questions, all the tour guides framed the tour as essential to a student choosing an institution. It is important to acknowledge that not every high school student will have the opportunity to visit a campus they are interested in. While there is some research on virtual tours and the opportunities available to students unable to visit campuses, such as the online tours discussed earlier, a physical tour was still viewed as essential in the process. Every institution has different approaches to attracting students, but a model in which online opportunities are more robust and take the emphasis off physical tours will allow a greater number of students to make more informed decisions (if this is in fact the purpose of the tour). An expansion of online tours and campus exploration would take some of the responsibility off admissions offices and allow students to make more informed decisions regarding their college choice process.

These suggestions could successfully enhance the college tour structure while also meeting student needs. The importance of tours and tour guides in determining how a student's experience was when visiting a campus was a common theme across interviews and these suggestions help enhance those benefits. Changes in tour structure and focus could be an initiative taken on by admissions offices, faculty members, tour guides, or the

administration. Current admissions offices could work on enhancing online tours by collaborating with technology offices to best utilize available technology. Admissions offices and tours guides could also collaborate with students unable to take campus tours to develop more robust online resources that best fit the needs of those students.

Finally, it is clear in this study that tours were viewed positively by tour guides. Admissions offices and tour guides truly wanted what's best for prospective students and as such, should consider strategies for incorporating academics more and developing more robust online resources. The tour guides in this study were engaging, passionate, knowledgeable and approachable. The impact tour guides have on prospective students can be extremely influential on students, and the suggestions in this study, although not generalizable, may be transferable if shared with admissions offices to make further improvements to the structure of their tours and resources available to prospective students.

### **Implications for future research**

While this study illuminates the perspective of tour guides at guaranteed admissions institutions, and incorporates observations of five tours, there are still limitations and gaps in the knowledge. More future research, especially regarding evaluations of virtual tours, is needed. The author suggests that further study into the effectiveness of online resources and tours for high school students will allow admissions offices to expand their practices and meet the needs of prospective students who can't attend tours in person.

## **Conclusion**

This case study followed Campus tours at guaranteed admissions institutions across the Midwest and Southern United States. The researcher attended five tours, and interviewed five tour guides across four of those institutions about their opinions of the purpose of campus tours, which were the center of this case study. Findings were organized into four categories: schedule and structure of tours scope of tours, and purpose of campus tours. Parallels were made between campus tours and sales pitches, showing how the two are similar and share common themes. Important findings from this study include the consensus among tour guides that tours are an integral part in students choosing the right institution, so implications were developed based on that. Implications include the need for the expansion of online campus tours online resources for students unable to attend campus tours, along with the need for further research.

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## Appendix A

### INFORMATION SHEET FOR RESEARCH

#### Interview Protocol

##### Questions to tour guides

1. How did you get the position?
2. How long have you been in this position?
3. What is in the scope and what is out of the scope of a tour?
4. What elements of your campus tour that you believe are unique?
5. Is there a campus tour during orientation? If so, how does it differ from today's tour?
6. Are there any questions asked/topics that you are told to refer the people on the tour to refer to the admissions office?
7. How (if at all) is the tour altered if there is an admitted student on the tour? If there are changes do you do them personally or are you trained to make them?
8. What are the most common questions you are asked?
9. How common were the questions asked today?
10. Are there any questions that are frequently asked despite the tour already covering the information?
11. Is there anything else you'd like to add regarding the tours that you feel would be useful?
12. How would you define the purpose of a tour?